

TITLE – TECHNOLOGY PLANNING & BUDGETING
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It's Sunday night and you are getting ready to go before a Judge in the morning. You have been at the office all day working and as you go to save your final document, you realize that your cursor is frozen on the screen. You cannot exit, you are frozen and you must shut down your pc. When you power your pc back on, your login to the network says "network connection cannot be found." You decide to venture into the room where the file server is located and you realize that all of the lights are off on the file server. Your file server is 5 years old and you have been trying to get your money's worth out of it. You go to the file server and nothing you do will get it back on. All of your documents are stored on the file server and now your pc cannot access the file server and the file server will not start. Your computer consultant has been recommending a new file server for the past 6 months, but you told him that you didn't want to replace it...

Technology planning and budgeting plays an important role in making sure that your computer network stays functional and operational. Every year you should make a technology plan and budget for the upcoming year. Sometimes this technology plan and budget will only be for maintaining hardware and software, and other years, it will include a budget for replacement of hardware and software.

For planning purposes, you must first consider the life expectancy of your computer hardware and software. Software life expectancy is determined by how often the software manufacturer releases new versions of software. Many software manufacturers release a new version every year. When software manufacturers release a new version every year, most firms will upgrade their software every other year. If you do not practice this method, then you should not be more than two versions behind the latest version of software. If you have any problems or issues with your software, you will want to be able to get technical support and most software manufacturers support two versions behind the latest version. The current problem with running one or two versions behind the latest version of software is Microsoft's Windows Vista Operating System. Firms are being forced to upgrade software since the introduction of Windows Vista in February 2007. Many Windows Vista compliant software applications have been released only within the past 9-12 months. If you are not on a Windows Vista compliant version, the software will not run properly on a Windows Vista pc. It is important to take a look at your software applications and start upgrading them to Windows Vista compliant software, since it is just a matter of time before you will have to install a Windows Vista pc in your office. If something happens to an existing pc and you have to install a Windows Vista pc, it will cause a snowball affect, because all of your software applications will also need to be replaced at that time. This is a very important reason to plan your software upgrades and to start upgrading to Windows Vista compliant software versions. Also, in a business environment, you should not buy a pc with Windows Vista Home Edition. You should purchase a pc with Windows Vista Business Edition or Windows Vista Ultimate Edition.

Computer hardware has different life expectancies. Your Pc's, notebooks, and file servers, all have a life expectancy of 4 years. Although pc's and file servers will perform longer than 4 years, typically within a 4 year time period new operating systems have been released and the new versions of software will require more RAM and more hard disk space than your current pc has installed. Also, processor speeds on new pc's and file servers typically double every 4 years. Therefore, software manufacturers write their new versions of software for faster pc's with more RAM and newer operating systems. There is a constant battle between hardware and software. Your laser printers, computer monitors, surge protectors and UPS's (uninterruptible power supplies) should have a life expectancy of at least 6 years or more. The Firewalls/VPN devices you use on your network have a life expectancy of four to six years. Even though they will continue to work, you will need to replace them because you will not be able to put the latest security updates on your older model. You will know when it is time to upgrade, because you will not want your computer network's security to be compromised.

Planning for the replacement of pc's and file servers is extremely important. The implementation process and installation of new equipment goes much smoother when it has been planned and scheduled. If you wait until an emergency arises; such as, a failed file server, the installation will be rushed and you will definitely experience a greater amount of down time, since you will have to wait for equipment to be ordered, delivered, and prepped before the installation. Plus, it can be difficult to retrieve data files from faulty equipment.

Every firm should develop a yearly technology budget. Some firms replace all of their pc's and file servers every four years. These firms will sign a 48 month lease for all of the hardware, software, and services. The first two years of a new network's life, there are very few maintenance costs, since everything is new. Another approach to budgeting is to replace the file servers every 4 years and every year in between, replace one third of the pc's. Also, do not forget that there is a cost to maintaining your computer hardware and software. You will have to budget for annual renewals of software; such as, virusscan software, anti-spyware software, and spam filtering software. Also, budget for just general maintenance of your pc's.

Meet with your computer consultant or IT person at least once a year to discuss the age of your equipment and to decide whether or not you will be able to get another year out of it. Discuss the latest versions of software and whether it is time to upgrade your software. Also take this opportunity to have your consultant educate you about new technology so that you can think about whether or not it will be beneficial your firm.

You wake up Monday morning and realize it was just a horrible dream. You smile. You replaced your file server months ago!

Alicia A. Slade is the President of Plummer Slade, Inc., a computer networking firm specializing in providing computer networking and business solutions to law offices since 1988.